

Secret Smile by oogonium

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Summary:

He wishes he could stop himself, really he does, but a guy can only take so much indifference before becoming totally insecure.

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Author's Note:

Someone mentioned that Steve's own "aloof" advice would drive him crazy and I find myself agreeing 1000000%

The way she behaves always seems so incredibly self-assured. Sure, a lifetime of dealing with bad men probably makes you seriously in tune with your gut instinct, but Steve believes that there's something about Kali that's just, *like that* . He sees it in the way she guides El through her powers, in the way she talks to the adults, he sees it when it's just the four of them, late at night listening to old records at his house, and Nancy drags her up to dance together. Not a hint of self-doubt, not an ounce of hesitation. He sees it the most when she smiles at him, though. There's always a glint in her eye as if she were holding onto a secret that he knows too, but doesn't *know* that he knows- if that makes sense? To be fair, it's only something he began to notice after she actually smiled at him for the first time-

They're both leaning against their respective cars when the thought first occurs to him. The sun's past its highest point, the heat has barely started to subside as they wait for school to let out. She stands next to him, finishing off a cigarette, eyes trained on the main entrance. Usually, he can enjoy the silence they share but today it seems like something's crawled under his skin, making it feel like his clothes are too tight, like his body's not actually his. She hasn't even looked at him since he got here, not to mention said hello.

"So, uh, real scorcher today, huh?"

He could hit himself. Really he could. The look on her face as she turns toward him doesn't help. She's raised a single eyebrow, the hand holding the cigarette is frozen halfway to her mouth, which is now twisted into a confused frown. He racks his brain for something, anything, he can say to save the moment. "I hear there's a warm front moving in from the Pacific. Have you ever seen the Pacific? I keep

telling myself I'm going to take Dustin one day, so he can finally see an actual ocean, but it's just, like, he burns so easily you know? I keep telling him to wear more sunscreen but he just waves me off like I'm crazy. I even put a travel bottle in his backpack, which I bet you he hasn't even opened yet-" He looks up at her again, stomach sinking as he sees the confused expression on her face has only deepened.

Nice going numbnuts .

He balks, brain going into overdrive, *Just save what's left of your dignity with a joke, asshole!*

He smiles sheepishly, "Anyway, I got a new meatloaf recipe and installed safety locks on the bathroom cabinets, but, it's not like I'm his mom or anything..." No reaction. He pulls off his deputy hat and begins to fan himself, stubbornly believing it's the summer heat and not the complete lack of social skills making him feel so warm.

You were never this nervous around Nancy the smug voice interjects again. He finds himself muttering under his breath, "yeah, well, she didn't have mind-bending superpowers"

"Did you say something?"

"What? No! No, I'm just- just thinking out loud." She stares at him, unconvinced. He tries not to break under her gaze. A beat of silence. Finally, she shrugs and takes one last pull of her cigarette before crushing it under the heel of her boot.

He wishes he could stop himself, really he does, but a guy- *anybody* , really- can only take so much indifference before becoming totally insecure.

"Kali," he takes a deep breath and pushes it out before he can rethink what he's doing, "do you hate me?"

This time, she really does stare at him. For a while. He grips his hat between his hands to stop himself from fidgeting, God he used to be *so cool*, he used to be King Steve, a goddamn ninja.

"What makes you think that?" nothing in her voice gives anything

away, a question asked for the sake of clarification and nothing more. He shrugs his shoulders once, "I dunno, I just, you always get really quiet and broody when I'm around and I know I was a dick when we first met and I really am sorry about that whole mess with your car and the nail bat and I swear I didn't mean it when I said El was probably safer with Max behind the wheel than with you and-"

"Steve."

He looks up from his rambling to see her staring at him with a new intensity, something full of warmth and... and something else he can't quite place. She fully turns toward him as she begins to talk, "If you haven't yet noticed, I'm *always* quiet- and broody, apparently" she adds, despite his visible wince, "You were an insufferable prick when we met, I won't deny you that. For the record, I'm still quite mad about my van. I drive the way I do because, like most things, I had to figure it out on my own, and anyway, I know what a joke is, Harrington." She waits for him to re-establish eye contact before continuing, "But despite all of that, I-"

The moment is broken by the sharp ringing of the school bell and the clatter of hundreds of kids exiting the building. They both turn to watch the Party make its way to the back of the lot where they've parked. Part of Steve wants her to keep going, to finish her thought at least, but he knows the moment- if that's what it could be called- is over. As she arrives, El gives her sister a quick hug before turning to face him, her expression serious. "Steve, Mike and I would like a ride to the arcade." Before he can even begin to complain, Kali snaps at her sister.

"Jane. What did we talk about?"

The curly haired girl turns to look at her, eyebrows scrunched before the face of someone who's been recently chewed out takes over. She tries again, a little more hesitant, "If you're not busy, we would appreciate a ride to the arcade." she looks back at Kali, her older sibling's expression still unimpressed. "Please?"

Kali nods once before calling over to rest of the party, "And the rest of you?". Five kids turn around from the side of Steve's cruiser where they're trying to shove their backpacks in before the others. Steve

turns to see Kali raise a single eyebrow, inciting a chorus of Thank-you-Steve and we-appreciate-you-Steve. He turns back to the rugrats, too surprised to enjoy the cowed look on their faces. From behind him, he hears Kali speak in a matter-of-fact voice, "I can drop El and Michael off at the arcade. I'll do my best not to drive like Max."

And there it is; her smile. He stares after her as she crowds Mike and El into the back seat of the van, as she rounds the car to the driver's seat, as she hops in and turns the ignition, shooting him one last grin before pulling out of the driveway.

Despite Lucas kicking the back of his chair on the way to his house, or the weird sunscreen smell coming off of Dustin's bag, Steve finds himself smiling softly all the way home.

When he asks Dustin about it, a few weeks later, the kid just groans and flops back onto the grass.

"Oh man, it was so *weird* . One moment she's listening to us talk about that whole fiasco with the gate and the demodogs, the next she's talking about 'being grateful' and 'appreciating the people who take your shit without complaining' and something about you being a total pushover-" he dodges the whack Steve aims at his head "and how we should say thank you more often." He looks up to grin at Steve, "You should have seen it when Mike tried to sass her, freaking hilarious, dude." Steve imagines it would have been. From the corner of his eyes, he can see Max teaching El how to braid with the unshaven half of Kali's hair. They've stuck some dandelions in the plaits and somehow, she still manages to make it look punk. She meets his eye as he takes a sip of his soda, smiling softly as he tips it in her direction. Maybe he doesn't know what that secret part of her smile is quite yet, but as he leans back to enjoy the sun, he thinks he wouldn't mind taking the time to figure it out.